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## BRITISH CAVALRY.

*By a Cavalry Officer.*

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THE recent debates in the German Parliament on the proposition of the Imperial Government to increase the peace effective of the Army have drawn attention to the importance attached to cavalry by the chiefs of the German Army. The War Minister plainly stated that the policy of his Government is to maintain as many squadrons during peace in full efficiency as it can afford, and pointed out to his critics how Russia has carried out the same plan, and how formidable an army of cavalry stands ready on the eastern frontier of Prussia.

While this policy is pursued by Continental Powers, exactly the opposite opinion appears to prevail in this country.

In the Colonial and petty wars which we have waged in this generation, cavalry has played an insignificant part. It has become the fashion to consider incongruous the idea of Dragoon Guards and Hussars fighting in a jungle, and so-called mounted "infantry" has been called into existence to do the work of cavalry on these expeditions, thus excluding cavalry leaders from their share of the experience and promotion derived from them. It is certain that the persons best qualified to form an unbiassed opinion on our military institutions, namely, those foreign leaders who in the ordinary course of events might be pitted against us in war, are at no pains to conceal their wonder at the inferiority into which the first horse-owning and riding nation of the world has suffered its cavalry to sink relatively to the rest of Europe.

That this opinion is generally held as to the quality as well as to the quantity of our cavalry among competent foreign critics, no one who has carried his enquiries beyond the usual platitudes of courtesy interchanged can doubt, and it is proposed very briefly to discuss some of the reasons on which this unfavourable judgment is based.

To begin with, it is incontestable that the organisation of the British cavalry is bad, even very bad; and that, in spite of the facility with which it finds recruits and the large proportion of it which serves at home.

Without discussing our organisation in detail, some of the points in which it fails and in which reform is most essential are easily sketched.

The squadrons receive their recruits at no stated time of year, but by ones and twos as they happen to enlist, and there is no proportion maintained between the trained and untrained men. The lately-formed reserve squadrons have not been able to serve the purpose of giving all the recruits their first training, because the number of recruits is at times so large that they have to be distributed through the other squadrons, and because the reserve squadron includes so many men who are employed otherwise than in learning to be cavalry soldiers.

No lasting improvement in our system of training can take place until squadrons are as really commanded by their nominal chief as is a battery of artillery. The number of men "regimentally employed," musicians, tradesmen, waiters, and so forth, in each regiment of three squadrons, is amply sufficient for six squadrons. No fighting unit can become efficient, however zealous and industrious its officers may be, while it is swamped with recruits and young horses all the year round.

Our men enlist for seven years, consequently no squadron should have over one-sixth of its strength untrained recruits at any time, and by a certain time of year every man in each service squadron should be a trained soldier. This, of course, can only be done by separating the Indian depôts from the units at home, or at any rate by attaching these depôts as separate squadrons under their own officers.

Most officers will agree that this had better be done, for under our essentially regimental plan no good can be expected from mixing men of different regiments. Our whole system hinges on the principle of keeping the corps intact and separate.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of re-organising the British cavalry is not without its difficulties, but compared with many problems of administration it is a simple one, and should not long block the way. We are too fond of dwelling on the peculiar difficulties of our military situation, and too apt to forget how little we turn to account good material such as no other country possesses. For what nation has such raw material as Britain either for cavalry officer or trooper; and where else is there so perfect a training ground for the inherent qualities of the leader as the hunting field in England and Ireland?

It has been roundly asserted that the training of our squadrons is devoid of interest and lacking in objective. The initiative and resourcefulness of the young officer is repressed and discouraged rather than cultivated; for years he does nothing but superintend the execution of a routine, unless he is selected to be the adjutant of his regiment. There is a limit to the time, energy, and patience which can be exacted from any body of men, and that limit is more quickly reached in a voluntary Service such as ours, where the officers are conscious of sacrificing their interests to the Service, and the rank and file are well aware of their own value, than in the national and compulsorily recruited Armies of the Continent. For this reason it is most necessary in such an Army as ours to be economical and reasonable in the demands on the troops, so that everything useful may be learnt, while nothing that is useless wastes their time.

In every Army a higher standard of professional excellence is expected of the cavalry officer than of the leaders of the other arms. For what are the duties which fall to him? In peace to train and mould his men, and to raise them to a far higher pitch of skill and individual

<sup>1</sup> This applies more strongly to the men than to the officers. The Service would probably gain if a certain interchange of officers between regiments took place. Exchanges have practically ceased, and most officers spend their whole career in one regiment.

intelligence than is elsewhere required of the private soldier. In war the junior officers of cavalry will be constantly employed on patrol work, the correct execution of which needs a thorough knowledge of tactics and a sound comprehension of strategy, besides the individual qualities of energy, dash, and wit.

It is a commonplace, that on the successful accomplishment of the task of an officer's patrol the fate of many an Army has depended. The skill requisite for such performances can only come of knowledge, and such knowledge will only be acquired by young officers if it is taught and encouraged by their seniors. Whether they possess it or not will generally depend on whether they are professionally benefited by it or not. So long as the test of a cavalry subaltern's worth consists in repeating by rote those pages of the Drill-Book which deal with what is called "Increasing and Diminishing the Front," he will not, if he is wise, trouble his head with more profound knowledge, which, however, does not pay at inspections, where his value is assessed.

These considerations lead one to regret that our cavalry is, for the purposes of inspection and higher command, under two officers only: the inspector-generals in India and at home. These officers are expected to report from personal knowledge on each officer in their command. With all the energy, zeal, and impartiality in the world they cannot do it. Twenty-four to thirty squadrons, quartered well within a general's reach and under his constant observation, is the greatest number that one leader can really superintend.

To place one man over 160 squadrons scattered over the Indian peninsula, with five months only of the cool season to make their acquaintance, is to demand the impossible, and great harm is certain to be the result. The recent organisation at home of four cavalry brigades is an admission of the fact, but the remedy is too partial. Moreover, both the brigadiers and the regiments in their command are constantly on the move.

Let us consider the purpose for which our cavalry exists, and the task it will have to perform in war. It is of a twofold nature:—

Firstly, to join in punitive expeditions against the tribes on our frontiers, such as Arabs, Afridis, and Boers.

Secondly, to play a part in a European contest, either in defence of these islands, or on the offensive to assist a Continental ally or coalition.

For the first of these objects, fighting in wild countries, great mobility, tactical adaptiveness, initiative among the leaders, and, to descend more to detail, a thorough development of the fire power of the arm, are essential.

For the second *role*, of meeting a European foe, the same qualities are essential, with the additional necessity of being able to fight and march in masses, and to be abreast of the tactics of the first military nations of the world.

Part III. of our Cavalry Drill-Book lays down the following excellent precept:

Nothing which is not simple can be successfully done in war, and accordingly, what is simple must alone be taught and practised in peace. "No exercise should be learnt on the drill ground which is impossible of execution on the field of battle."

Nothing could be more practical, or more in the true spirit of cavalry action. Several pages of drill follow, however, which cannot be said to comply with the principle announced, and it has so happened that an altogether fictitious importance, an importance out of all proportion to any practical purpose which it serves, has been given to this part of the Regulations. We refer to the ten pages devoted to what is known as "Increasing and Diminishing the Front."

The object of these instructions is to teach a cavalry force to form a column of route, and in all Armies they are of the simplest nature, as befits a movement which should be so easy as to be no tax on the memory or intelligence whatever.

We have, on the contrary, still in our Drill-Book a number of route formations extremely complicated to learn and perplexing to remember.

What a Russian peasant recruit can be taught in a few days thus occupies our men as many weeks; a large proportion of the short time annually at the disposal of the squadron commander is similarly expended, and, worst of all, it absorbs the attention of subalterns and N.C.O.'s just before every inspection instead of work of a practical kind.

We have no less than three separate formations for column of route in our cavalry, each based on absolutely different and conflicting principles, where one is amply sufficient.

To come to the recruit's drill on the square. It cannot be seriously contended that the pains and time expended in teaching him the manual and sword exercises correspond in any degree to the skill he thus acquires as a fighting man.

The drill of the squadron in the field has been immensely improved and simplified in recent years, though here again we can hardly be said to be keeping pace with our Continental rivals. The most important part of the mounted soldier's training, wherein his individual intelligence and instruction makes itself most felt, is unquestionably the service of information and security.

Pages 283 to 356 of the Drill-Book deal with the subject under the heading of "Manœuvre," and in the main these regulations are good, though somewhat too anxious to provide for every contingency with detailed instructions. It is the practice of these duties which is open to criticism.

Not only is the individual instruction of the trooper neglected or confined to teaching him the Drill-Book by rote, but the art of patrolling is almost unknown in our cavalry. *And yet patrolling is much the most important service cavalry can render to its side in war*, and it can be well done by cavalry which fights indifferently and which is for other purposes poorly mounted. On the work of small patrols, from officers' patrols far ahead of the Army to the patrols of two or three troopers which scour the by-ways and keep up communications between marching columns and

ensure the co-operation of combined movements of all sorts, the success of many a battle will hinge. The failure of the Saxons and Prussians to keep up communication and combination on the open fields west of St. Privat on the 18th August, 1870, and the consequent disaster to their arms, should not be recorded for us in vain. In every Continental Army patrolling is carefully taught. Cossacks, Boers, and Afghans excel at it.

The system of cavalry outposts which we practise is that known as the "cordon" system, and it is learnt with great precision. It consists of a continuous chain of look-out posts in sight of one another and formally linked to their supports and reserves, thus covering with a fan-like formation the whole front which it is intended to watch.

Although patrolling is also recommended and even insisted upon, no great reliance is evidently placed upon its results; or why should it also be necessary as a normal formation to wear out our forces with a cordon of videttes as well?

Of course, cavalry may, under very exceptional circumstances, be compelled to furnish such a chain of outposts, but it would normally be the task of infantry, and we learn the rare exception as the ordinary process. The scheme for reconnoitring is open to the same kind of objections, and is in reality the outpost formation set in motion. We sweep the country with a net through whose meshes small fish can easily penetrate unnoticed, while the brigade or division thus formed is so effectually dispersed that a concentration to meet a cavalry attack is practically impossible.

General de Gallifet has well described this vain attempt to be strong everywhere as the "paralysis of true cavalry action." A force of cavalry can be easily ruined if too much be asked of it by its own commander. The bare necessity in war is extremely exhausting to man and beast. Nothing beyond it should be attempted or practised in peace. Initiative in the leaders, intelligent co-operation in the troopers, are vital to success, but these qualities will never be developed by unsound tactics and unreal situations.

It is most unfortunate that we cannot in England canton troops in villages. To take up such quarters after dark, to arrange for their protection, and to rapidly re-assemble from them before it is light, as we should almost invariably have to do in war, requires considerable practice. With our present organisation the difficulties of teaching men to patrol and reconnoitre are almost insuperable. All the winter, when such duties are taught in the Continental Armies to the trained men while the recruits and young horses are receiving their early education, our squadrons are strangely weak. One squadron is "struck off duty" for equitation drill; a considerable number of men in the other squadrons are on furlough; a still larger number are with the regiment, but owing to their special duties are not available for mounted instruction in the morning; so that the squadron commander, after vain attempts to collect some portion of his command to teach them the most essential of their duties, soon accepts the inevitable and sends his men out morning after

morning, riding one horse and leading two, to "watering order under the orderly officer" along the lanes, as the only method of getting his horses exercised and keeping them in health.

To launch into criticism of the stable management and horse management of our cavalry would carry the length of this paper beyond bounds. It may be noticed that our men spend more time in the stable than any other cavalry, and that there exists no systematic plan for gradually bringing the horses of a regiment up to a state of working fitness. Normally they are kept fat and sleek in light exercise; fitfully they are worked harder than usual, though never so hard as European cavalry is worked at manœuvres, consequently the number of horses in every squadron which have a "screw loose," and which could not be relied on to stand the continuous strain of active service, is too large.

It is not yet realised in England that the effective strength of a cavalry force is limited not by the men it can muster—there are generally plenty of them—but by the number of horses it can count on to carry a trooper in marching order 30 miles a day for a week on end with short rations and scant comforts. The value of an Army depends to a great extent on its offensive power, since the side which resigns itself to passive defence is always finally defeated. No Army will, however, be formidable in offence if it be lacking in aggressive initiative, if it loses mobility, and has to grope in the dark for want of good cavalry and the true spirit of cavalry action.